

The Relation between Mimesis, Desire and Violence in Girard's Work

By Per Bjørnar Grande
Associate Professor
Bergen University College
Norway

Desire and the Destruction of the Self

The reason why mimesis is so closely associated with violence is that it easily leads to rivalry. Violence always seems to be mingled with desire,¹ and, even if it is 'righteous', a response to some kind of injustice, violence is often located in some sort of rivalry.² Terms such as imitation, identification, and comparison do not have to turn out to be violent – even when a great deal of competition is involved.

However, I would disagree with Hamerton-Kelly that connecting mimesis with desire means that mimetic desire always is violent, thus restoring the insight of Heraclitus that violence is the source of all.³ The all-decisive factor is the shift from competition to rivalry, from being allies to becoming enemies. The transition from being competitive friends to rivals comes as the result of desire. Desire is the generative force behind violence, the snake that turns friends and lovers into rivals. Traditional societies tried, and often very successfully, to protect individuals through prohibitions and taboos. These prohibitions and taboos were directed against any kind of activity which could possibly unleash violent rivalry. The killing of adulterers, thieves and foreigners can be seen as a way of ridding society of pollution, and cleansing it from the potential imitation of bad desires. In this way the society's violence functions in a protective and anti-mimetic way. The violence against transgressors is a kind of mimetic anti-mimesis, a way of telling people to follow the rules of society so that they would become mimetically immune to the forces that threaten society. Violent victimizing appears to fulfil a generative function by preventing transgressions, 'cleansing' morally and restoring

¹ See Girard. *Violence and the Sacred* (5th Ed.), Maryland Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986, 145.

² In cases where injustice and exploitation have been done against a community, desires are often initially sparked by the exploiters. This rivalry can also be manifested as rivalry among the exploiters, which is then materialized into further exploitation and easily calls for violence among the exploited victims, because of the rivalistic desires among the persecutors.

³ Hamerton-Kelly. *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 132.

peace. But, at the same time, it bears (unconsciously for the participants) a similarity to what one wishes to expel, namely the feared violence and pollution of the person(s) victimized. Despite attempts to expel violent transgressions, the attempts themselves are quite similar to the violence they are trying to exorcise. Both Freud and Girard have seen that those who conduct a rite of sacrifice are projecting onto the sacrificial victim qualities that reflect some of their own innermost concerns.⁴

Sacrificial violence, seen from a modern, non-sacrificial standpoint, is a kind of suicide. By killing the other, one also kills something in oneself. Modern societies are full of these projections of one's own desires onto the other, which expose the modern variant of scapegoating and which are often less physically and more psychologically violent yet still victimizing in their attitude of projecting. This Freudian act of projection resembles the act of doubling, the intense mimesis of the other that creates doubles. From a Girardian perspective it is double desire that leads to violence.⁵ The imitation of each other's desires will sooner or later lead to rivalry, and then to violence.⁶ This doubling does not only have to involve two people; it can be two groups, two countries. But the effect is always negative. Schwager explains it in the following terms.

Whoever is desirous has to expect that the others will too. Whoever succumbs to rivalry arouses the same passion in others. Whoever resorts to violence is imitated in his or her actions until, sooner or later, the deed falls back upon his or her own head. (Schwager. Must There be Scapegoats?, 81.)

This excellent description of reciprocal violence shows just how inevitable the escalation of violence is. There is something organic in mimetic rivalry; the contamination is so strong that the way out of violent conflicts seems to require a change of heart, an act of forgiveness in order to stop the never-ending cycle. The process of violence, as we can see, is only different variations on the structure of metaphysical desire as described in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. It is the desire between the subject and the mediator in different configurations. And the initial object, which started the rivalry, seems to get lost in the turmoil.

⁴ Jurgensmeyer. (Ed) 'Is Symbolic Violence Related to Real Violence?' in *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World*, London: Franc Cass, 1992, 3.

⁵ 'Mimesis and Violence' in *The Girard Reader* (Ed. James Williams). NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996, 12.

⁶ 'The more a tragic conflict is prolonged, the more likely it is to culminate in a violent mimesis; the resemblance between combatants grow ever stronger until each presents a mirror image of the other.' (Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*, 47.)